

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEASON—FALL 2019

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As I sit here writing today, with most of the state and most of the world on quarantine lockdown, it's hard to imagine the carefree world of the fall of 2019, when we were birding wherever we wanted to, and in groups, at that! Unfortunately, even in those better days, the data coming in from all of you around the state reflected an overall decline in birdlife—both in terms of species and quantities. Most of the positive comments reflect temporary favorable conditions which are part of long-term troubling trends—unseasonably warm weather encouraged migrants to linger, vagrants from the south or southwest are becoming more regular, high water levels favor puddle duck populations in a few areas, and so on. But these positive comments were far outnumbered by the negative—for waterfowl, shorebirds, passerines and even gulls.

First, for the weather. September temperature reports ranged from average in a few Regions to above average in most, and that carried over into October, with all but one Region recording higher than average temps. Everybody reported a colder than average November, when the enjoyment of autumn's lingering landbirds came to its inevitable halt. Most Regions were likewise similar in precipitation reports, with September and November almost uniformly dry and every Region reporting a wetter than average October.

Puddle duck numbers were strong at the Northern Montezuma WMA in Region 2, but elsewhere the best Regional comments regarding waterfowl numbers were along these lines: from Region 1—“mostly typical”, Region 5—“unremarkable” and Region 6—“unexceptional”. A few species were given favorable mentions, for example American Wigeon numbers were better than normal at Wilson Hill WMA in Region 6, and there were good numbers of scaup in Region 8 with better than average scoter numbers there as well. Good numbers of Redhead were reported from Region 2, with a maximum count of 5,000 at Conesus Lake. Waterfowl concentrations at Montezuma NWR included a Pintail count of 6,200 while the peak Ring-necked Duck count was 9,000. 375 Ruddy Ducks was an excellent tally at Basic Creek Reservoir in Region 8. Rare ducks were, well, rare, with the only Tufted Duck being a female in Region 1 and one Eurasian Wigeon in Region 3 and a small handful in Region 10. A few King Eiders and Harlequin Ducks were scattered across the state. One of the latter, an adult male at Oswego Harbor was apparently a real stunner, bringing about gasps of ecstasy and, dare I say, histrionics, from those lucky enough to observe it. A hybrid Common Goldeneye X Hooded Merganser was found in Chenango in Region 4, where it also put on a nice show for birders and photographers.

Cackling Geese were recorded in nine of ten Regions, Greater White-fronted Geese in six of ten. Ross's Geese were reported from Regions 2 and 3, each with one bird, and Region 7 with two reports totaling seven birds. Trumpeter Swans

are well established in the western parts of the state, with as many as 20 scattered across Regions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6.

A count of 259 Horned Grebes at the El Dorado Preserve in Region 6 must have been an impressive sight. In Region 3 an early high count of Common Loon was recorded at 344 birds. Pacific Loons were great finds at Beechwood SP in Region 2 and at Seneca Lake in Region 3.

Looking at the chickens, a couple of Northern Bobwhites at opposite ends of the state must be survivors of reintroduction programs. Slightly larger scatterings of Ring-necked Pheasants and Ruffed Grouse were also detected. Spruce Grouse were found in both Region 6 at Massawepie Mire and at Madawaska in Region 7, including a max of four individuals in one report. Does that sound a bit more encouraging than the reports of recent years?

Northern Fulmars were recorded during a September pelagic trip out of Brooklyn. A Brown Booby was seen from shore during a seawatch at Robert Moses SP in Region 10, part of a north Atlantic-wide irruption. An unidentified sulid seen a month later at the same location was thought to possibly be a Masked Booby, a bird that is probably an overdue addition to the state list.

Two upstate Great Cormorants were great finds, one in Region 5 and another that lingered for weeks in Region 7. American White Pelicans were again widespread in small numbers, occurring in five Regions with multiples in Region 1. Brown Pelicans were seen in all Region 10 counties except Manhattan and the Bronx, with a maximum of 15 on Staten Island.

Least Bitterns lingered well into October in Regions 1, 2 and 3. At Braddock Bay, Great Egret on 30 November was surprising, while a Snowy on 23 November in Region 9 was very late. A Little Blue Heron lingered in Region 9 until 5 November, a Regional record. A Yellow-crowned Night Heron in Region 5 was a nice Regional rarity, well documented by a patient observer. White Ibis is a great bird anywhere in the state, and one at Montezuma in Region 3 attracted birders for several days. The state's only White-faced Ibis for the season appeared in Region 2, the second record for that Region.

The rise of the Black Vulture may have slowed a bit this season, with none reported in Regions 2 and 4. Some of the downstate hawk watches still showed decent counts, and this is probably more of a "blip" than a trend. Golden Eagle numbers were down slightly at Franklin Mountain Hawk Watch in Region 4, but elsewhere numbers continue to be encouraging, with reports from eight of ten Regions. In Region 3, 10 birds in less than one hour were noted at one location, and even Region 10 had three reports. Broad-winged Hawk numbers were noted as high at two hawk watches, Helderberg in Region 8 and Franklin Mountain. A Swainson's Hawk was photographed in the Black Dirt Region in Orange County and a report of another in Region 7 is pending review.

Nine Regions reported Virginia Rail and eight reported Sora, not a bad showing. A rail photographed at the Marine Nature Study Area in Region 10 may have been a King, although a hybrid with Clapper could not be ruled out. Sandhill Cranes were reported from nine of ten Regions, further indication of their newly

achieved status as a regular part of the state's avifauna. A Purple Gallinule was a one-day-wonder at Central Park, in Region 10.

Comments from Regional editors painted the shorebird migration as generally poor with scattered highlights. American Golden-Plover was reported from every Region, but large flocks failed to appear again. An American Avocet in Region 1 on 24 October was on the late side, while down in Region 10, Avocet was reported from at least seven locations. Marbled Godwit was a good find in Region 2, as were Hudsonians in Regions 5 and 8, the latter being the first record since 2004. A scattering of all three phalaropes was found across the state, with the latest being Reds in Region 6 on 2 November and in Region 8 on 6 November. Last year we noted that Peregrine Falcons were killing and storing cuckoos on building ledges. This season Buffalo City Hall became the final stop for another tough-to-find species, as Peregrines switched up the menu—check the Region 1 report for details.

Numbers for gulls and terns were generally poor, but as usual there were a few highlights. A Sabine's Gull in Region 1 was somewhat expected, but one on Lake Champlain in Region 7 was more unusual. Upstate, Black-headed Gulls were found in Regions 1 and 6, and Little Gull flew past Derby Hill. Regions 2 and 8 both reported Franklin's Gulls and Region 3 had two Laughing Gulls. Iceland Gulls were reported from nine Regions and Lesser Black-backed from eight.

Terns were mentioned mainly for staying later than normal, with "many" Common Terns into November (Region 1), Forster's into November in several Regions, and a Black Tern on 3 November in Region 6. Three Sandwich Terns on eastern Long Island were part of a movement of birds, normally associated with tropical storms, that this year were found apart from adverse weather conditions.

Parasitic Jaegers were reported from six Regions, including around two dozen in Region 2. That sounds like an excellent seasonal tally. There was also one report of Pomarine there as well. In Region 7, Lake Champlain produced both Parasitic and Long-tailed on the same day. An unidentified alcid photographed at a distance in Region 2 sounds intriguing.

A Rufous Hummingbird was identified in Region 1, a first record for Cattaraugus County. Unidentified Rufous/Allen's Hummingbirds were found in Regions 1 and 4, and a non-identifiable desiccated hummer was picked up in Region 2 in early November. Woodpecker numbers were generally typical, with Red-bellied continuing to establish itself upstate. Black-backed was reported from Regions 6 and 7.

Olive-sided Flycatchers were found in nine Regions, and comments were surprisingly favorable for this declining species. See the Region 8 account for a discussion of this species' status. *Empidonax* flycatchers also seemed to be slightly above normal and staying a little later than normal, probably connected to a warmer early fall. As part of a decent flight of western flycatchers statewide, two Say's Phoebe were reported, one each in Regions 4 and 10. Ash-throated Flycatcher has become more or less annual now in Region 10, and this fall five

different birds were reported, one on Staten Island and four on Long Island. Western Kingbirds were recorded from four Regions, with seven birds found in Region 10 alone. Northern Shrikes were widely reported but mostly in unimpressive numbers, with nine Regions recording them.

Mild temperatures allowed many passerine species to linger well into October and even November. White-eyed Vireos were found in several upstate Regions where they are normally quite rare. One at Onondaga Lake was found by birders looking for the previously reported Yellow-crowned Night Heron—a mini Patagonia Picnic Table Effect in play there. Very late were one in Region 2 on 15 November and another in Region 3 on 27 November. A Philadelphia Vireo on 9 November provided a late record for Region 1. A Bank Swallow at Montezuma NWR in Region 3 set a late record. A Cave Swallow in Region 2 was the only one reported statewide, a statement that would have been nonsensical not so many years ago! Increasingly scarce, Boreal Chickadee was reported from Regions 6 and 7.

Sedge Wren is always a good bird in New York, especially away from their very limited breeding areas. One at Sandy Pond in Region 5 and another in the Bronx were great finds. A Region 3 count of 1,600 Swainson's Thrushes passing overhead at night seems extraordinary, but we're only just starting to peek into this fascinating aspect of birding, and only after accumulating a lot more data will we begin to understand what is "normal" for many species.

Comments on the warbler migration seemed to generally run from "unexceptional" to "better than average", but again there was a lot of commentary regarding late records. Among the warblers mentioned as staying beyond normal departure dates included Tennessee, Nashville, Mourning, American Redstart, Northern Parula, Magnolia and Bay-breasted. In Region 10, eight Ovenbirds were found in November in New York City parks.

Most Regions reported decent sparrow flights starting in early- to mid-October. Among the rarities was a first Region 1 record for Spotted Towhee at Tiff Nature Preserve on 17 November. Lark Sparrows in Region 3 and 9 were good finds, a LeConte's in Region 7 was a second record for the Region, coming on the heels of the first record two months earlier. LeConte's were also found in Regions 1 and 9. Nelson's Sparrows were found in seven Regions, which would seem to be a surprisingly strong showing. Are we just getting better at working out sparrows, maybe with the assistance of digital photography?

A Summer Tanager on 1 October was late in Region 9, but one in Region 2 on 28 November was exceptional. 34 Scarlet Tanagers at Bluegrass Lane in Region 3 must have been quite a sight!

There were a number of impressive blackbird tallies. An observer at Rome in Region 5 estimated a single flock of blackbirds at 200,000 birds! A flock of 1,500 Rusty Blackbirds in the Oneida Lake area of Region 5 is probably more than most of us will see in a lifetime. Also in Region 5, a count of 648 Bobolinks is very impressive. A Yellow-headed Blackbird was reported from Region 8, and an

audio recording of a meadowlark in Region 10 seems to support the identification of Western.

Painted Buntings undertook a widespread incursion into the northeast, with virtually all birds being green females or young males. One made it to the Jamaica Bay Refuge in Region 10. Winter finches were almost completely absent statewide. Red Crossbill was recorded from two Regions, while White-winged went unreported. Pine Siskins were reported from eight Regions, but no large flocks were detected.

Although a number of decent birds were found, there were very few true rarities. Even species that just a few years ago would have been off the charts, like Brown Booby or Cave Swallow, are not so surprising anymore. So, for this season, Bird of the Season goes to a species that has turned up twice in the past year—Golden-crowned Sparrow. In December of 2018, the fourth New York State record of this species was found in Downsville, in Region 4. This season another was found in Sayville, Suffolk County in Region 10. The earlier bird was not included in this column when it should have been, but the birding gods have insisted, and now these two outstanding records are given the recognition they deserve. Hundreds of birders enjoyed these rarities.

Hopefully by the time you read this we will once again be gathering with friends to enjoy great birds and good times.

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